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Pentagon Revelations About 'Stealth' Planes Bring Political Tangle

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The Pentagon's public disclosures about "Stealth" aircraft, planes designed to be invisible to enemy radar, have developed into a political tangle for the Carter administration.

The immediate question is whether Defense Secretary Harold Brown and other administration executives disclosed sensitive information about Stealth to help defend President Carter against charges that he has allowed the nation's defenses to deteriorate.

Rep. Robin Beard (R-Tenn.), who has battled Brown on other defense issues over the last few years, told the House yesterday that the defense secretary is scheduled to appear before the House Armed Services investigations subcommittee Thursday to answer questions about Stealth revelations.

Beard called the Pentagon's Stealth disclosures "an irresponsible compromise of one of our most sensitive projects. I shall demand criminal prosecution."

Beard's denunciations came after Benjamin Schemmer, editor of the privately owned magazine Armed Forces Journal, testified under oath Wednesday that the disclosures to him and others about Stealth appeared to him to be "a directed leak for political purposes, because I can think of no reason why this story should be made known at this time."

During the course of that hearing, Adm. Daniel J. Murphy, a Pentagon intelligence executive, told the subcommittee that William J. Perry, Pentagon research director, had given Schemmer a limited amount of information about Stealth.

Perry elaborated on his disclosures in a statement issued yesterday by the Pentagon.

"The decision to declassify some parts of this technology was driven by a number of leaks in the media," said Perry's statement. "On 11 August, Aviation Week and Space Technology mentioned the advanced technology Stealth bomber. On 14 August, a Washington Post article went into greater description of this technology. Also on 14 August, there was a mention of this program on ABC-TV news."

Those disclosures, Perry said, forced the Pentagon to admit the existence of the Stealth program and to declassify a limited amount of information about it.

But Perry said he felt he should offer to answer some of Schemmer's questions about Stealth because at the Pentagon's request, the magazine editor at the Pentagon's request in 1978 had withheld publication of an article containing information about the program.

Denying he pushed to get the story printed, Perry said: "I did not encourage Mr. Schemmer to publish the story. In fact, at one point I said that I would prefer not to see the story published, but that I did believe that Mr. Schemmer was entitled to first publication because of his previous agreement to withhold."

Perry said he requested Schemmer to hold the Stealth article until Aug. 21, the day before Brown was to hold a press conference confirming the earlier stories that the Pentagon was developing Stealth aircraft.

Brown and Perry said at the Aug. 22 Pentagon press conference that the leaks had made it untenable to deny that the Pentagon was indeed pursuing Stealth aircraft under a hitherto secret program.

Although the Pentagon executives did not mention it, the decision to confirm Stealth in a high profile televised Pentagon press conference in election year 1980 came after ignoring much earlier mentions of Stealth in the technical press.

Back on July 23, 1976, for example, the trade newsletter "Aerospace Daily" wrote about the technical objectives of the Stealth program then getting underway: "The goal is to reduce aircraft visibility — optical, acoustic and radar signatures — through new technology," the newsletter said.

Since then, the Pentagon has actually built four test Stealth aircraft and flown them at Nellis Air Force Base outside Las Vegas. Brown said last week that the technology for making aircraft virtually invisible to radar has been proved out and would end up on any new U.S. bomber.

The big trick is to keep the enemy's radar beams from bouncing from the plane to the sending antenna on the ground, thus forming an image on the radar scope. The image locates the plane for those trying to shoot it down.

Some specialists working on the Stealth program told The Post that they were astonished that Brown and Perry would lift the tight secrecy lid and confirm for the Soviets that the technology was firmly in hand. One such specialist, in registering his dismay said the Soviets assume that much of what is printed about such projects is planted by the U.S. government to throw them off the track and make them spend money on the wrong weaponry.